



Sustainability Series

Number 3 • March 2009

# The Role of the District: Supporting Student Success

How District Choices Affect Student Achievement  
Using Data to Inform Decision Making  
Staying Focused on Priorities

# Welcome

## Sustainability Series

## Number 3

**T**he purpose of this brief is to provide districts with a better understanding of their role in the success of Reading First and in its continuation. It provides practical strategies that districts can use to lead and support schools as they implement and sustain a school-wide reform model like Reading First, thereby increasing the likelihood of widespread success and bringing a greater number of students to grade-level reading standards.

This brief, one in a series addressing key aspects of Reading First sustainability, provides ideas to help leaders in your district sustain the success they have established through the Reading First initiative. Other aspects of sustaining school-wide reading models that are based on scientific research are addressed in other briefs in this series. Please check the Reading First Sustainability website (<http://www.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/support/sustaining.html>) for other titles in this series.

### The Authors

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Sustainability is the ability of a program to operate on its core beliefs and values (its reading culture) and use them to guide essential and inevitable program adaptations over time while maintaining improved outcomes.

*Adapted from Century  
and Levy, 2002*

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*"Mobilizing the minds  
and hearts of peers  
across the district  
is the key to deeper,  
lasting reform."*

*Fullan, 2005*







# District Systems and Support Strategies

## What is District Support?

By district support, we mean “support” in the active sense, the on-going actions of various district leaders (e.g. curriculum, assessment, training, budget, personnel, etc.) to strengthen scientifically-based reading initiatives such as Reading First in one or more of its schools. While our initial interest is in finding ways to sustain Reading First in schools where it has been successfully implemented,

the ideas from this brief can also be used to scale a district reading initiative across multiple schools through strong central office leadership.

## District Actions

District support can be thought of as taking place at two levels. At one level are **district actions and activities** which work with school improvement efforts, but do not always provide support at a deep level, with district-wide scope or for an extended

period of time. They might have limited impact or a short duration. They might be seen as connected to a particular person or to the way things are being done at the present time.

## District Systems

At a higher level are strategic actions, taken with deliberation by forward-thinking leaders to create **district systems** that will help drive student achievement and which will still be in place even when they, the leaders, are gone. Both levels of support are useful, but the latter is more powerful.

## What the Research Says

With Reading First, schools and districts across the nation have reported significant improvements in reading for early elementary students (Center on Education Policy, 2006). This impact is the result of the coordinated efforts of multiple levels of the educational system working together—the federal government provides assistance to states, which work to build capacity of

Classrooms are embedded in a broader school and education system. Student achievement is directly affected by instructional quality; instructional quality is directly affected by school capacity; and school capacity is directly affected by the district context.

*King & Newmann, 2000*

local education agencies to support the efforts of school leaders and classroom teachers—who provide high quality instruction to students. The various levels of the educational system are aligned to work together for a common goal: grade-level achievement for all students.

But how can we guarantee this will last? If Reading First gains are to be sustained, action is needed to ensure its continuity. Building a framework of support at the state, district, and community levels is essential to the successful implementation and sustainability of any school-level reform (Datnow, 2005). Classrooms are only a part of the broader school and education system. Instructional quality affects student achievement; but instructional quality is affected by school capacity; and school capacity is affected by the district context (King & Newmann, 2000). Ultimately, what takes place at state and district levels affects the instruction each student receives at the classroom level.

### Every Level Counts

With sustainability as our focus, we have to realize that each level of the system has the capacity to either help or hinder reading success. The bottom line is that school districts strongly influence the choices that schools make to improve teaching and learning. Administrators and teachers at the school level

need stable district support as well as strong commitment and leadership from the district. In the words of one administrator, “Schoolwide reform has got to have top-down support. If the principal and teachers don’t perceive support, there’s no buy-in” (Datnow, 2005). Many districts are more oriented to processes and operations than to outcomes. As such, they are often more focused on doing things a certain way than on achieving the desired outcomes.

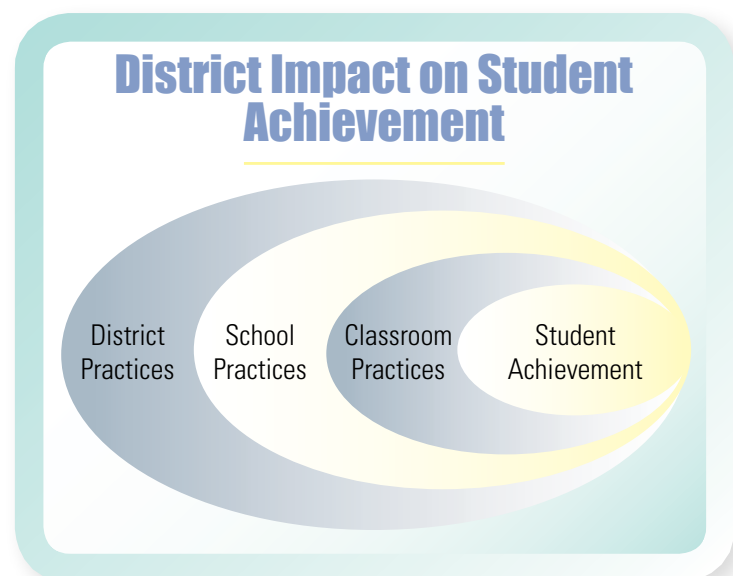
### District Practices and Student Achievement

In a six-year study of over 500 higher performing schools The National Center of Educational Accountability (NCEA) demonstrated a link between district practices and student achievement (NCEA, n.d.). As illustrated in the following graph, district practices influence school

practices, which ultimately impact classrooms and student achievement.

Given this impact, it is imperative that district leaders take an active role in the implementation of research-based practices at the school level. Beyond basic support, the district must provide strong leadership to:

- ♦ establish priorities and stay focused;
- ♦ create a district reading culture;
- ♦ cultivate leadership from within;
- ♦ support the process for collaboration and align programs and services; and
- ♦ optimize all systems within a district to support student achievement.



# Specific Strategies for District Support of Reading Initiatives

In the rest of this brief we will discuss specific strategies districts can use to support scientifically based reading initiatives such as Reading First. Below are strategies and a few examples of ways that districts can enact them. For more explanation, see the text on pages 7-13.

## Focus on Priorities

- ♦ Set reading goals and track progress.
- ♦ Incorporate goals into consolidated district Improvement Plan and expect schools to do the same with their school improvement plans.
- ♦ Reflect the goals in school board and administrator meetings.
- ♦ Maintain the reading priority over time.
- ♦ Hold structured trainings and work sessions for school data teams and expect participation.
- ♦ Model and expect sharing of reading data with various stakeholder groups.
- ♦ Hold reading data work sessions with principals and school board.

## Support District Reading Culture

- ♦ Articulate a reading mission and vision.
- ♦ Use these elements to guide planning and provision of support services (e.g. professional development, staffing, scheduling, budgeting).
- ♦ Communicate common expectations and non-negotiables for schools to address in implementing an evidence-based reading model.

## Cultivate Leaders

- ♦ Use the evidence-based reading model as a guide when hiring and assigning building principals, coaches and teachers.
- ♦ Provide training related to this model to current and aspiring administrators & other reading leaders (workshops, shadowing, mentoring, taking part in collaborative activities).
- ♦ Support selected aspiring administrators in getting leadership experience in this model & in obtaining licensure.

## Lead the Process for Collaboration

- ♦ Convene joint meetings of general education special education, federal program leaders in planning for program alignment.
- ♦ Use blended funding to support your reading initiative.
- ♦ Expect school staff to collaborate across programs.

## Optimize Systems to Drive Achievement

- ♦ Cultivate shared beliefs about the district's mission and vision for reading instruction.
- ♦ Establish procedures for collaboration and communication.
- ♦ Define methods for systems' monitoring.
- ♦ Make clear that the systems are for supporting student achievement.

# Stay Focused on Priorities

With increased federal emphasis on accountability and evidence-based programs, it is ever more necessary that district leaders be committed. Whenever new initiatives appear on the horizon, district leaders must examine them for contextual fit with current goals and prioritize them based on student needs and available resources. Often districts try to take on too much—or they allow their *schools* to take on too much—when what they should be doing is to see the bigger picture, look across all initiatives, and determine how they best fit into the needs of the whole district.

Unfortunately, a common cause of reform failure is the presence of competing reforms (Datnow, 2005). When competing reading initiatives emerge in schools, district leaders must evaluate them to assure that scientifically based reading research defines how reading is taught. These questions should be considered:

- ♦ Are the five essential components of effective reading instruction addressed (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension)?
- ♦ Are ongoing assessments used to guide instruction in the classrooms?
- ♦ Is there a multi-tiered approach to instruction in which all students are provided with the level of instruction appropriate to ensuring success?
- ♦ Is the instruction explicit and systematic?

## Discard Programs that Don't Fit into Your Priorities

It is certainly easier for schools within a district to remain focused on the mission of all students reading on grade level by third grade when they are not distracted by reading initiatives that do not fit this evidence-based

model. In the struggle to keep reading goals on target, this is one thing all districts can do to help their schools keep their focus on the right priorities: discard any programs that are not grounded in scientifically based reading research.

## Use Data to Support Decision Making

One way to stay focused on priorities is to keep data at the heart of all decision-making. Data-based decision making is an essential tool of effective leaders and fundamental to the sustainability of reforms such as Reading First. Data can also be used to inform professional development needs, measure implementation success, identify staffing needs, and provide valuable information about improvement. In order to do this, a comprehensive district assessment system should exist, with established resources and processes for managing data. Additionally, districts should be able to provide schools with easy access to student-level data so that valuable instructional and planning time is not lost. Other components of the assessment system might include:

- ♦ using an assessment calendar;
- ♦ eliminating reading assessments that don't directly contribute to the implementation of the priority reform;
- ♦ defining processes for analyzing and interpreting student data;
- ♦ using the data for both short- and long-term planning; and
- ♦ establishing ways to communicate the data to all stakeholders.



# Create a Strong District Reading Culture

## District Leaders Set the Tone

A strong reading culture can evolve when a district has a reading vision, mission, and goals that support all students reading on level by third grade, through the use of scientifically based reading practices. The vision, mission and goals must be a part of all decisions so they are understood by and evident to everyone—the schools, the school board, and the community. Aligning the vision, mission, goals and decisions does not occur haphazardly. Rather, the superintendent and other district leaders must make it happen. In everything these leaders do, they must consider the priorities of the district:

- ♦ Is this decision in line with our vision, mission and goals?
- ♦ Are the behaviors I'm expecting and modeling aligned with the district mission and goals?
- ♦ Am I walking the walk—not just talking the talk?

It takes strong and determined district leadership to keep the focus on the priorities, and thus lay the foundation for an effective reading culture. But it is worth it; a well-established district culture provides a solid foundation on which principals can build the reading culture for their schools.





# Cultivate and Share Leadership

## Distributing Leadership

Shared leadership supports sustainability because it can help assure continuity of the school's direction over time. Instability of leadership is a common reason that a reform fails to continue (Datnow, 2005). Often when a strong principal leaves a school, the reform initiative goes as well. With district leaders cultivating and growing principals within the district, there will always be another, well-trained principal to pick up the reform and keep it

going. Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great* (2001), suggests the importance of “getting the right people on the bus, and getting them in the right seat.” Identifying the “right people” as school principals and allowing them to make decisions at the school level is one of the best ways to cultivate leaders.

One approach to distributing leadership is to establish a strong district reading leadership team which includes all key staff whose work impacts reading—the

superintendent, assistant superintendent for instruction, director of special education, director of federal programs, director of assessment, professional development coordinator, and principals.

## The District Leadership Team: Roles and Responsibilities

- ♦ Communicate Reading First goals to the school, parents, and the community;
- ♦ Communicate the plan for improving reading instruction, including ongoing professional development through coaching, classroom visits, and assessment analysis;
- ♦ Ensure that each school focuses on student achievement;
- ♦ Coordinate professional development efforts, including federal, state, and local sessions;
- ♦ Identify standards-based instructional reading programs, interventions, and supplementary materials;
- ♦ Manage data to inform decision-making at the district, school, and classroom levels;





- ♦ Manage a collaborative decision-making process for using assessment data to make adjustments and modifications to existing programs and practices; and
  - ♦ Meet regularly with school instructional leadership teams to ensure fidelity of implementation of the Reading First plan
- Center for Academic and Reading Skills, 2004*
- ♦ scientifically based reading instruction;
  - ♦ the vision, mission, and goals of the district;
  - ♦ using assessment data to plan school-wide improvements;
  - ♦ collaborating with the reading coach;
  - ♦ planning and providing professional development activities; and
  - ♦ district expectations for monitoring and evaluating progress.

### Cultivating Leaders

Planning for principal succession should not be ignored or avoided. District leaders should have a plan for building school-level leadership through training provided to future, novice, and experienced principals. For the future cadre of principals, build capacity by providing a strong foundation of knowledge in:

Novice principals who already have a thorough understanding of these practices can be provided with mentors who have been successful in their own schools. The district can provide opportunities for novice principals to meet with each other and with their mentors to discuss and share experiences on successes and areas for improvement. This

will also provide a potential network of support that can support principals in the district for years to come.

For the more experienced principal, professional development can focus on the specific needs of their campus. This requires an understanding of how to analyze student data and use it to drive decision-making. Does the student outcome data show a decrease in fluency scores or vocabulary scores? Does qualitative data indicate procedural drift? Just as teachers are expected to differentiate instruction based on the needs of their students, principals should differentiate professional development to teachers, and district leaders should differentiate professional development and support to principals

# Lead and Support Collaboration

District leaders have a responsibility to lead and support collaboration. This includes providing the venues for collaboration and breaking down the barriers that restrict it, but it also includes *modeling collaboration* through program alignment at the district level.

Collaboration should become part of the culture, part of “the way we do things here” for every district. From school board meetings to administrative staff meetings, collaboration is vital. Open discussion where leaders can freely discuss the needs of the individual schools should be encouraged, with the assumption that the district is available to support them in finding solutions. At times this may be difficult to achieve because of potential barriers, such as timing and tradition; however, district leaders

should be able to predict these barriers, and the superintendent can provide support by removing them whenever possible. It is the well-organized collaboration between the district and school levels that reaps rewards for the students.

## Collaborative Goal: Student Achievement

It goes without saying that student achievement should always be the focus of the collaboration that occurs among district leaders and the alignment of the various programs. District leaders must ensure that Reading First, Title I, Title II, Title III and special education programs work together to maximize student success.



# Optimize All Systems to Drive Achievement

Essentially, every district-managed system should be optimized as a mechanism to support the sustainability of Reading First practices and successes. These systems include, but are not limited to: curriculum and instruction, assessment and data utilization, revenue and budget, personnel, time-related systems,

communication and planning.

District leaders should periodically review each of these systems to determine how they can best support the district's mission and goals related to reading. Optimizing these systems requires (1) personnel who share the same beliefs about the district's mission and vision, (2) intentional procedures

for collaboration and communication, (3) methods for monitoring the systems' positive or negative impact on student achievement, and (4) a high expectation from the superintendent that the systems are there to support student achievement, not to simply support themselves.

| Systems                         | Examples  |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Curriculum and Instruction      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Adopt a scientifically-based core program as the foundation of reading curriculum and provide training and support in its use.</li><li>• Adopt an array of scientifically-based supplemental and intervention programs; provide training and support in their use.</li><li>• Provide on-going training &amp; support in effective differentiated instruction and in use of data to guide instruction.</li><li>• Provide on-going professional development for continuing and new staff in these topics.</li><li>• Structure professional learning communities for district and building leaders around reading improvement.</li></ul> |
| Assessment and Data Utilization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Expect &amp; support use of a formative assessment system for screening and progress monitoring.</li><li>• Require and support use of data teams at school and district level to review data regularly and to adjust instruction.</li><li>• Conduct data reviews at administrator meetings.</li><li>• Expect administrators to communicate data to stakeholders.</li></ul>  |



| Systems                               | Examples   |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Resources and Funding                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invest funds regularly from the district general fund to provide the foundation of support for the district reading initiative.</li> <li>Coordinate funds across programs to support the reading initiative at a sufficient level to assure its success.</li> </ul>   |
| Professional Development and Staffing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incorporate reading expectations into job descriptions.</li> <li>Provide mentoring and related support for reading leaders.</li> <li>Use “reading-based hiring practices” to select principals, coaches, teachers, district leaders (job posting, screening, interviews, reference checks, etc.).</li> <li>Incorporate an instructional walk-through or other reading-related activity into the hiring process for principals.</li> <li>Provide training for leaders on implementing and supporting improvement initiatives.</li> <li>Sustain training priorities over time.</li> <li>Plan for in-class support (coaching) to help staff implement skills on which training has been provided.</li> </ul> |
| Scheduling                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide time for staff collaboration around reading, provide structure use of this time &amp; hold schools accountable for how it is used.</li> <li>Require 90’+ reading blocks &amp; supplemental lesson time.</li> </ul>  |
| Communication                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Require schools to report reading data to district leaders and to various other stakeholder groups on a regular basis; provide a structure and a format for doing this.</li> <li>Provide structure for regular conversation between designated district leaders and individual principals about reading data.</li> <li>Report district level data to the schools, the school board and the public (parents and community), including goals, success, continuing needs and actions to address those needs.</li> </ul>  |
| Planning and Evaluation               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Integrate planning for implementation and sustainability of reading initiative into other planning done at the district and school levels (e.g. improvement plans, Title 1 plans, budget plans, staffing plans, etc.)</li> <li>Utilize or develop capacity to evaluate effectiveness of instructional program, including disaggregation of data by sub-groups, and commit to problem-solving around gaps in formative and outcome measures</li> <li>Establish regular communication to keep planning efforts unified</li> <li>Involve numerous stakeholders to develop commitment of the school community</li> </ul>  |

# Conclusion

With strong, determined leadership and commitment at all levels, sustainability of Reading First is within the reach of each and every school and district. It demands leaders who are systems-level thinkers to pave the way for all systems to work together to support research based classroom instruction.

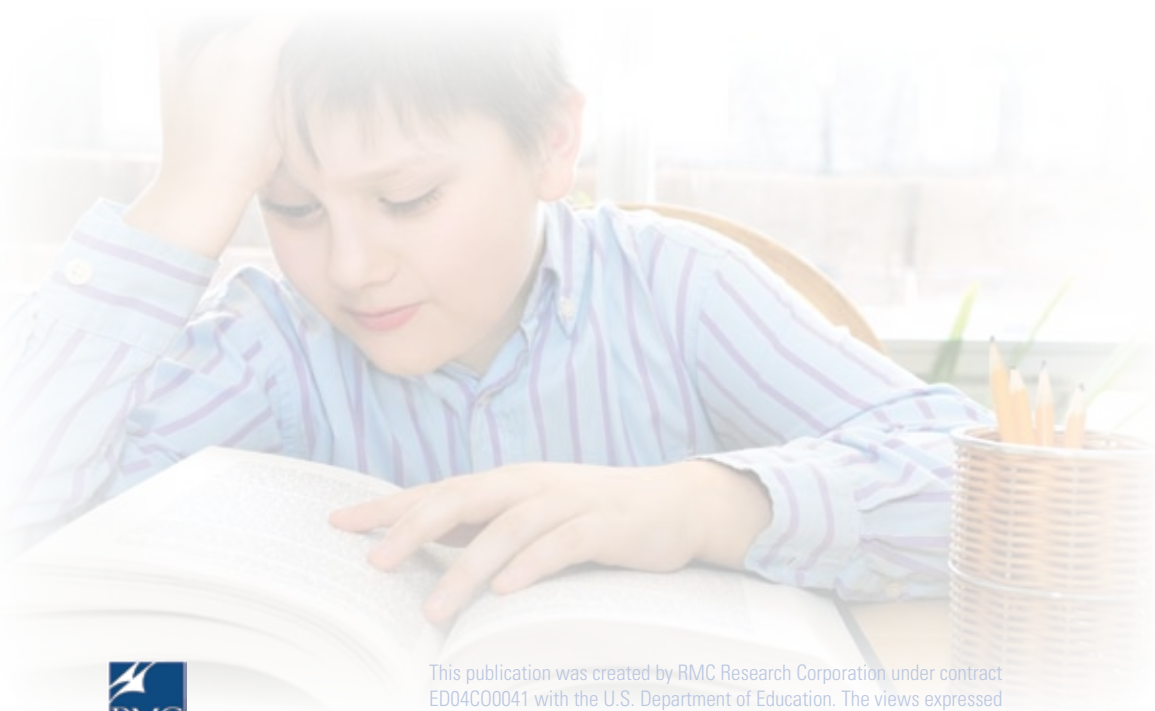
With perseverance and determination, district leaders have the capacity to create an entire system that supports the implementation of Reading First and produces success for all students. We know what needs to be done; are we bold enough to take the action to ensure that it will last?

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“Resilience is perseverance plus flexibility, but you need a plan and a modus operandi. The big plan is sustainability, and what keeps sustainable superintendents going is the combination of moral purpose along with building leadership in others. That combination increases the capacity of the whole system to show progress as it establishes the conditions for going further...”

*Fullan, 2005*



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